

SERMON: Instruments of Peace

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12

“I have had many blessings in my life and specifically through my association with my church.” These words were written by the late Dr. Raymond A. Ritter, Jr., and printed in a booklet of memories in celebration of the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of First Presbyterian Church. Ray continued, “Helping to organize the *By Faith We Grow* campaign was one of those blessings. To see everyone accept their responsibilities with such enthusiasm and respond with such generosity was truly a blessing.”

In the same collection of memories, Ann Ritter mentioned several names of those who had been welcoming, hospitable, and encouraging to her, and others whom she worked with on various committees and projects. I was impressed to learn that Ann was the first female to chair the building and property committee. She wrote about all she learned in this position: “I found I could chip ice from the sidewalk before services and vacuum up water in the dining hall when the window wells flooded – and they flooded often! I was just amazed I could do all of this with a husband and 3 sons and a father-in-law to take care of at home!”

Freck Shivelbine wrote of his memories of a twenty or thirty voice choir, “resplendent in their purple robes,” and how his “Dad or Aunt Norma Schultz played the pipe organ.” He also shared that he was one of about 40 boys in Boy Scout Troop Four. One important lesson he learned while hiking and camping was that a can of beans must be opened before heating it in the fire!

The scripture lesson we heard this morning from Galatians on the fruit of the spirit was a favorite of Geraldine Hirsch, and one that she sought to live by in her work with the Women of the Church and in all areas of her life. Her husband, Oscar was a Deacon and an Elder, and had a long list of service to his church and community to add to his impressive professional resume.

If you can’t find something, can’t remember who it was, can’t identify it, or don’t know how to fix it, Don and Shirley Gibson are the ones to call! None of us has any idea of the number of hours they spend – often behind the scenes, taking care of the church property inside and out, like it was their own home. And they are caring for it into the future as well, with notebooks full of detailed information about where it is, what it is, who it was, and how to fix it.

Each one of these faithful servants have shown that faith is not just an idea in your mind or a belief in your heart. Faith is a verb. Our faith in God, our dedication to Christ, and our commitment to the church is something that we act out. Furthermore, faith is not just a Sunday activity or something that happens only in church. Faith extends to every day of the week and beyond the walls of the church to wherever the road takes us.

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, pointed out that love also, is a verb. “Love is a verb. Love is something you do: the sacrifices you make, the giving of self. If you want to study love, study those who sacrifice for others. Love – the feeling – is a fruit of love the verb.”

And I’ve been thinking that this idea applies to peace, as well. Peace is a verb. We all know at least one person who enjoys conflict, who takes pleasure in provoking others into an argument, who wants to turn every disagreement into a fight. The rest of us would prefer to walk away, to disengage from the drama, to keep our mouths shut – even when we disagree. And we falsely believe that this is the way to achieve peace. It’s like that old adage that you should never discuss politics or religion in polite company.

But we need to remember the quote from Martin Luther King Jr., engraved on one of the granite benches in our Peace Park: “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.” While peace can be just a feeling or a state of being, peace cannot be achieved without a lot of work. Peace is a verb.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the crowd and his disciples about blessings in the passage commonly known as the Beatitudes. Specifically, he said, “Blessed are the *peacemakers*.” Not those who simply feel at peace or who refuse to engage in conflict, but those who do the work of justice to make peace available to all people.”

The irony is that working for justice, often brings enemies our way. Had Martin Luther King, Jr. kept his preaching inside his church, rather than taking it to the streets, to marches and boycotts and sit-ins and protests, he would have lived a much longer, more peaceful life. He made many enemies between the years of 1955 and 1968, and his commitment to non-violence did not stop others from waging violence against him and his family.

He sacrificed himself in working for justice and peace for all people.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

According to one commentary, the word, “*Peacemakers* does not connote a passive attitude, but positive actions for reconciliation.” In Matthew’s world, military conflict would not have been part of the situation, but “he may have applied peacemaking to reconciliation of conflicting religious and cultural groups.”

(The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew, Mark, p.180)

In each of the beatitudes, when Jesus uses the words, “Blessed are you” or “blessed are those” he’s not referring to possessions or good fortune or even good health. He’s not referring to rewards given to the righteous as the Jews assumed. In these sayings, Jesus is simply acknowledging the present situation in which people find themselves. “Of course, not every member of every congregation can claim to be meek, merciful, and pure in heart, but the beatitudes are addressed, not initially to individuals, but to the whole faith community. Among every authentic Christian congregation can be found persons of meekness, ministers of mercy, and workers for peace. Their presence and activity among us is a sign of God’s blessing and a call to all of us to conform our common life more and more to these kingdom values.”

The second part of each beatitude points us to the future, “based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, [and] that righteousness and peace will finally prevail.”

We are called to be an example of the kingdom of God. We are blessed for the purpose of blessing others.

Although we are honoring certain individuals this day, none of us can do the work alone. The church is a community of believers seeking to follow Christ. We need each other. We need to support and encourage one another. We need to work together to answer God’s call and to make Christ known in the world.

This congregation, with its many faithful servants, has a long and rich history of being a blessing to this community, not simply by our presence here on the corner of Lorimier and Broadway, but by our actions. Living out our faith. Producing the fruit of the spirit. Giving generously of our time, talents, and treasure. Sacrificing ourselves out of our love for God and one another. And working as INSTRUMENTS OF PEACE.

May we continue the tradition... to the glory of God! AMEN.